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Iannone, Carol: Letters Opposing Nomination of (1991): Correspondence 45

LeRoy Allen

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277 West 10th Street #6-F
New York, New York 10014
July 10, 1991

Senator Edward Kennedy
SD-428 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Kennedy:

I am not in the habit of writing letters to Washington. I have been so moved by the controversy surrounding Carol Iannone's nomination to the NEH's Advisory Council, however, that I cannot help writing to you about this grave matter.

While I am singularly unimpressed by Iannone's qualifications for a seat on the Advisory Council--I believe any professor of literature in the United States would be as qualified as she--I leave this area of scrutiny to others to explore.

What appalls me are Carol Iannone's racist views, and the attendant public perception that to call those views racist is to endanger in some way freedom of speech and to pare away at intellectual seriousness. In fact, racists everywhere can rally under Iannone's banner. Her brand of intellectual seriousness, as well as the giddy reception given it by some of her supporters, makes painfully clear that the only work Iannone is inclined to deem meritorious is work not done by feminists and minorities and work not about their issues. (I refer you to the Evans and Novak June 19, 1991, column in the Washington Post, in which Iannone is applauded for "scoff[ing] at such nonsense" as MLA sessions dealing with women's issues and with sexual freedom.)

In her March, 1991, Commentary article ("Literature by Quota"), Iannone writes of the "perennial need of human beings for the clarifying and transforming experience of art, of the imagination." The ultimate irony here is that Iannone possesses no understanding of the variety within the human experience or its possible contribution to the world of literature and to the transforming experience of art. One feels she is simply uncomfortable with black writers, feminist writers, Spanish writers, or in fact any writer who will prevent her from retreating to her safe haven of mainstream white America and mainstream Europe. That she does not

simply disqualify herself from making any analysis of these works, but boldly mocks them as mediocre and not up to her ill-defined standard of excellence, leaves no doubt as to the true contribution Iannone would make to the Advisory Council. Hers will be the voice shouting foul at any but mainstream authors; hers will be the voice claiming there can be only her brand of intellectual seriousness; hers will be the voice of comfort to racists everywhere.

I urge you to reject the nomination of Carol Iannone.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "L. Allen", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

LeRoy Allen

P.S. For the record, I am a black graduate of Harvard Law School and a lover of the arts. I enjoy many different types of artists. Both my parents are retired university professors. If pressed, I am sure I could persuade one of them to assist Iannone in a broader appreciation of literature.

✓ cc: Senator Claiborne Pell